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# Enterprise education in Geography: the case of the Plymouth Dragons

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## Abstract

This paper outlines an approach to embedding enterprise education in the undergraduate geography curriculum which has proved particularly successful, both locally in Plymouth and on the national stage. It showcases an employability module which involves students in developing a business/project plan for an enterprise of their design. This article evaluates this model of teaching enterprise skills and goes on to explain how a team comprising Plymouth geographers came to win the national student enterprise competition (two years running!).

## Introduction

The Plymouth School of Geography has designed its degree programmes to give special attention to providing opportunities for students to develop skills and attributes which employers value. For example, throughout all three stages of the BA/BSc honours degree programme, there are compulsory modules which are deliberately intended to help students prepare for the world of work. With respect to the teaching of enterprise skills, these feature particularly strongly in a stage 2 module entitled "Geography and Employability" (GGX2108) which also includes sessions on public speaking (oral presentations) and on careers education.

At Plymouth, enterprise learning is not simply focused around small businesses and commercial entrepreneurship – important though this is. As in the case of Pauline Kneale's work at Leeds (see Kneale's paper in this issue), we interpret the term 'enterprise' more broadly. The focus is, therefore, on developing attributes such as being creative, innovative and adaptable and encouraging in our students a capacity to generate ideas and make things happen. So, although entrepreneurship is often expressed in terms of self-employment and the development of new businesses, our emphasis on enterprise education is intended to prepare students not only perhaps for the world of small business, but also for operating effectively in much larger organisations where being creative is sometimes referred to as 'intrapreneurship'.

## The Enterprise Project

The GGX2108 enterprise project provides students with opportunities to:

- Work creatively in teams
- Develop research, analysis and critical thinking skills
- Practise project, risk, people and time management
- Work on unfamiliar problems
- Understand better their own capabilities
- Enhance their personal self-confidence

Students are assigned alphabetically by the module leader (Brian Chalkley) to work in groups of five or six. They cannot therefore simply work with their friends: they have to experience what it is like working with a group of people, some of whom will be almost unknown to them (there are typically 150-180 students in the year group and on the module). The teams are given the task of identifying and developing an idea for an innovation, service or product. This may take any form of their choosing, but is most likely to involve a proposal falling in one of the following three categories:

1. establishing a small business
2. developing some form of intrapreneurship practice in a large organisation
3. taking forward a policy, social or eco-entrepreneurship project or campaign

The briefing paper for the students makes clear, therefore, that their proposal can be about a commercial opportunity or about a not-for-profit venture involving some form of community benefit. Obviously, the precise nature of each group's proposal has to be debated and agreed by the team members. Students are encouraged to be imaginative in their thinking, but at the same time to ensure that their idea is broadly realistic and feasible. Also within the brief, students are given the freedom either to choose a project which has an overt geographical/environmental dimension or to take forward something which is not particularly related to the academic content of their degree

studies. In practice, however, the majority of projects in any given year do have at least a modest geographical/environmental dimension (See examples in Box 1).

**Box 1: Examples of recent enterprise topics include:**

- opening a diving business along a stretch of coast which currently does not have this facility
- developing a geography-related children's game
- establishing an activity camp for local disadvantaged children
- designing a car share scheme for student union societies
- developing sustainability advice for local schools
- providing bike racks on public transport buses.

In the time available, the students' ideas are obviously not carried forward for actual implementation: however the groups are expected to reach the stage where they can prepare and underpin a persuasive business/project plan.

## Teaching and support

Although a small number of students will have undertaken enterprise activities previously within their secondary education (perhaps as part of 'Young Enterprise'), for the majority of students the enterprise project takes them into new and unfamiliar territory. For this reason, the module puts in place a variety of forms of support and guidance as outlined below:

- Two lectures covering topics such as the theory and practice of enterprise and what can be involved in developing a business/project proposal. One of these classes is given by the University's Enterprise Officer and focuses on how to produce a business/project plan.
- A lecture and a handbook on the theory and practice of team working.
- Two guest lectures from 'real world' entrepreneurs/consultants who tell their personal story and give insights into what it takes to succeed in the commercial and voluntary sectors.  
A list of relevant literature and websites (see some examples listed in the references/resources section at the end of this paper).

The students are given about ten days to come up with a proposal topic, which they then submit to the module leader (Brian Chalkley) for approval. This ensures that all the ideas on which they focus are broadly appropriate. The groups then have about three weeks before the final class, which takes the form of a 'Dragons' Den'.

## Dragons' Den

One of the highlights of the GGX2108 calendar is, indeed, the Dragons' Den session where about 6-8 groups (chosen at random) make a three minute 'pitch'. In this pitch, they try to sell their idea to an audience which comprises all the students taking the module plus, most importantly, three or four experienced professionals representing the world of business/work. These external representatives form, in essence, a Dragons' Den (rather similar to the BBC TV programme), with each of them asking questions of the particular team under the spotlight. Typical issues for exploration might include: whether there is a real need for this product/service; who might fund it; whether there is local competition; what existing expertise the students have; what problems they envisage etc.

There is a real sense of theatre about the Dragons' Den event. All those present are expected to engage in active listening so that they can be ready to ask a question from the floor and identify any lessons or ideas which could be relevant to their own project group. At the end of the session (which typically lasts just over an hour) everyone is asked to vote for what they consider to be the strongest and most enterprising proposal. The members of the winning team are each given a small book token by way of a prize.

## Assessment

The GGX2108 module is worth 10 credits out of 120 for the full second year geography programme and the enterprise project carries one third of the module marks. It is important to note that, although the Dragons' Den is a rich and entertaining learning experience, the votes cast do not in any way determine the students' assessment scores. The formal assessment for the enterprise assignment takes the form of a 1000 word group report, which is essentially a business/project plan. Its precise content is for each group to determine, but students are advised to include, for example, a description of the idea/product/service that they wish to develop, how they intend to go about it, the existing expertise they possess, the market research required, who the customers/beneficiaries would be and how the enterprise/project would be taken forward, funded and managed.

The report should also make clear its audience i.e. who it is intended to persuade (eg a bank, possible sponsors, senior managers etc.) With respect to the assessment criteria, students are informed that their work will be judged on how effectively they have satisfied the enterprise project brief and how well they have evidenced qualities such as creativity, innovation, feasibility and persuasiveness. Marks are also awarded for presentation and written style. A 250 word annexe to the report (also assessed) requires the students to reflect back on their experience of the enterprise project and identify the lessons they have learned, particularly with regard to its team working dimension.

## Evaluation

Although the module, overall, typically receives high satisfaction ratings from the GGX2108 students, from the statistics it is not possible to separate out the students' rating of the enterprise project from the modules' two other ingredients i.e. public speaking and careers education (which are also both assessed). However, students regularly make comments about the enterprise assignment as part of their written module review and as part of an informal discussion at the end of the term. It is possible, therefore, with some confidence, to identify student reaction and, more widely, the overall strengths and weaknesses of this approach to teaching enterprise skills.

On the positive side, many students recognise that it is important for them to acquire 'business related' skills and they also normally enjoy the cameo guest lectures from our entrepreneurs/consultants. Many recognise the importance of having a taste of the post-university world and appreciate the value of this very different form of educational experience. Certainly, everyone enjoys the learning ('edutainment') provided by the Dragons' Den.

However, students do also voice some concerns. For example, the team-working ingredient inevitably raises familiar problems about unequal contributions. When this issue arises, the group is given the option of not having a single shared mark, but of using a form of peer review to weight the marks so as to recognise individual contributions (though in practice this alternative model is very rarely asked for or used). A small number of students also see the project as too business-oriented, given that they may not wish to pursue careers in the commercial world. In the words of one student last year, 'I want to be a teacher so I don't see the value in learning about enterprise'. An interesting comment!

Overall, the enterprise project is, nonetheless, seen in a positive light by most staff and students. It has now operated for three years in largely its current form and there are no plans for major changes. One unanticipated benefit from GGX2108 has been its role in helping to underpin the success of Plymouth geography students in the National Student Enterprise Competition, as outlined below, by Katrina Gibson the leader of the successful team in 2007/8.

## National Student Enterprise Competition 2007/8

The National Student Enterprise Competition, more commonly known as 'FLUX', is the largest student enterprise and employability competition in the UK. Around 8,500 students signed up to take part in the 2007/8 competition, and over the preliminaries, one hundred universities entered teams in the seven regional heats. The challenge culminated in ten teams competing in March 2008 for a trophy and for a £3000 cash prize. The event was held at the University of Plymouth since its 2006/7 team (all geographers) had won the previous year's competition. All the challenges and tasks for the Grand Final were based on established businesses that have identified a specific growth agenda that is current and real for them, and would benefit from some fresh eyes and ideas. The winning 2007/8 Plymouth team consisted of four geographers and two business students, whilst a range of other disciplines were represented through the other teams, from architecture to politics.



*Winning Flux*

The Plymouth geographers had previously worked through GGX2108, and many of the challenges that they encountered throughout the competition were similar to those faced in the enterprise module. The Plymouth team had not worked together prior to the regional heats, but all could see how GGX2108 had provided excellent preparation for playing Flux. The team had to give several presentations throughout the competition and engage in discussions with the business experts, with the event finally culminating

in a 'press conference' style presentation to over 100 people. This required each member of the team to communicate effectively, their points to the audience: so the public speaking skills practised throughout their geography degree and especially through GGX2108 proved very useful. Overall, the module not only equipped the individuals with the necessary skills for FLUX, but also gave them an early insight into the business world, and the skills involved in being creative and developing ideas and plans.

After winning Flux, several members of the team have had offers of graduate employment and work experience from some of the judges, with one team member already starting up their own business. Whilst also developing their personal skills and business knowledge, they now have something that only a very small number of graduates are able to claim on their CV and in job interviews. While it is generally acknowledged that geographers have the skills to go into many different sectors of graduate employment, the GGX2108 module and the FLUX competition provide unusually effective ways of developing and testing these skills. The success of geography students in the national competition two years running illustrates just how enterprising geographers can be!

## Resources

**BBC2: Dragon's Den:** <http://bbc.co.uk/dragonsden/>  
**Kneale, P. (2003)** Context 2003 – Enterprising intrapreneurship case studies. Available at [http://www.geog.leeds.ac.uk/courses/other/case\\_studies/](http://www.geog.leeds.ac.uk/courses/other/case_studies/)

**King, H. (2006)** Enterprise, skills and entrepreneurship resource pack. Subject Centre for Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES). Available at <http://www.gees.ac.uk/projtheme/entrep/entrepres.htm>.

**Maguire, S. and Guyer, C. (2004)** Preparing Geography, Earth and Environmental Science (GEES) Students for employment in the enterprise culture. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 28,3 369-380.

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*The winning team*